

**Statement of Dr. Nathan Boonstra Opposing Expansion of Immunization Exemptions
Presented to a Subcommittee of the House Human Resources Committee
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My name is Dr. Nathan Boonstra, and I'm a pediatrician at Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines, as well as a board member of the Iowa Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. I've been practicing here for almost eleven years and did my residency at Blank Children's for three years before that. For the health of Iowa's children, I implore you to **oppose House File 7**, which introduces a "personal conviction" exemption for immunizations required for school entry.

When I think back on my time caring for children in Des Moines, some of the most tragic and heartbreaking experiences I had were when a child contracted a disease that could have been easily prevented. I've seen tiny unvaccinated babies suffer from whooping cough, to unvaccinated teenagers suffering from chickenpox that left permanent scars. I've seen deaths from diseases such as pneumonia and meningitis, some forms of which are preventable by today's vaccines.

Conversely, as a pediatrician, I find great joy in talking to families about how to help their kids thrive. And in a lot of areas, as we should, parents have a great deal of latitude in terms of how to raise our children – such as their discipline, their diet, and their education. But that latitude is not infinite. There are certainly things we don't allow parents to do, when there is a significant risk to the child. We don't allow infants to be riding in a car without a car seat, for example. We set limits when child's safety is at stake. Vaccination is one of these safety measures, and this is why we require immunizations for kindergarten entry.

There is already a large amount of flexibility regarding the immunization requirement for Iowa schools. Children with a medical contraindication can get a medical exemption signed by their child's doctor. Those with religious concerns can get a religious exemption without difficulty. And though pediatricians don't recommend doing so, parents who are nervous about vaccines can even stretch the vaccine schedule out prior to kindergarten if they so choose.

Yet we know that states with personal conviction exemptions, compared to neighboring states with only medical and religious exemptions like Iowa, have lower immunization rates among schoolchildren.

Vaccination is unique, in that to withhold vaccines doesn't only negatively affect one's own children, which is disconcerting enough. It has the potential to affect many others, particularly in a school setting. As no vaccine is 100% effective, there are always going to be a small number of vaccinated children in a school who can contract one of these diseases. But when unvaccinated children are added and increase that risk, the potential for outbreaks in the school setting increases dramatically. Some of these kids have special medical needs, like congenital heart disease or severe asthma, and could be seriously harmed in such an outbreak.

But even more concerning is the risk to children are children who have immunodeficiencies, who I see in the clinic on a regular basis. These kids were either born with this condition or acquired it because of medical problems like leukemia. These are our community's most vulnerable because they have a double whammy: vaccines don't work on them, but they are at the highest risk of complications,

including death, by the diseases vaccines prevent. It's because of these children that immunization passes from the realm of individual choice into public health.

Many of these children still attend public school, and they have the right to. They should be able to go to school in the safest environment possible, which is a school that has strong "herd immunity": a vaccination rate high enough to greatly reduce the potential of outbreaks.

In the past, Iowa has been recognized for high immunization rates, such as by the Commonwealth Fund in 2011. This is a recognition that Iowans want to have. What we don't want to be recognized for, is what happened in California in 2014, where lax immunization rates due to personal conviction exemptions led to the Disneyland measles outbreak. This outbreak spread to several of Iowa's neighboring states including a daycare in Illinois where five infants were infected. And in recent years, measles has been increasing around the country, after being eliminated from the United States in the 1990s.

Many states are taking steps to improve vaccination rates in their counties, but this bill would be a step backwards for Iowa. It's a straightforward equation. Adding a personal conviction exemption will simply make it easier to get vaccine exemptions against medical advice, and vaccination rates will decrease. And as we know from other areas around the country where vaccine rates have declined, this will increase cases of disease that are easily preventable.

Our state should put kids first, and err on the side of protecting children from dangerous and potentially deadly diseases, like measles, whooping cough, and even polio. House File 7 does the opposite, placing our schoolchildren at risk. **For our children's health and for the safety of our schools, I ask that you oppose House File 7.**